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### The Resurgence of Russia in the International System via Foreign Policy Strategy in the Middle East

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Aleksandra Plucinski

Senior Integrative Project

## **The Resurgence of Russia in the International System via Foreign Policy Strategy in the Middle East**

### **Abstract:**

This independent study will look to analyze the various strategies that Russia has pursued in regaining international influence since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Specifically, it will consider how Russia has attempted to utilize its close proximity to the Middle East, to implement change in the region to further advance its own agenda. The areas of focus will include Russia's military strategy, trade developments, and manipulation of soft power to nourish positive perception of Russia within the region.

### **Introduction:**

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in a new era of international relations, dominated by the unilateral might of the United States. The great Communist state had finally collapsed, making way for a new world order in which Russia was all but irrelevant. Their political system was overthrown, their ideology was defeated, and their economy was in shambles. By 1991, the economy was in such a recession that it had contracted over 17 percent and consumer conflation had reached 140 percent<sup>1</sup>. The new Russia, attempting to develop as a democracy, did not threaten U.S. interests and remained relatively extraneous as this new era unfolded.

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<sup>1</sup> Hailes, Theodore C., and Air University . Center for Strategy Technology. *Resurgent Russia in 2030 Challenge for the USAF*. Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Center for Strategy and Technology, Air War College, Air U, 2009. Occasional Paper (Air University (U.S.). Center for Strategy and Technology) ; No. 66. P. 28

Times have changed since then. Now, many scholars are examining a new scenario, one in which Russia regains its presence on the international stage. Stunning economic growth since 1998, during which the ruble all but crashed, has now transitioned into startling increases that have led to a GDP growth of \$1,312 in 1999 to \$8,842 in 2007.<sup>2</sup> According to one report, experts now say that “at some time in the next 20–40 years, Russia will re emerge as a world power”.<sup>3</sup> While some authors quibble about dates, there are few who argue about the eventual outcome. The idea of a “Resurgent Russia” is quite prominent now, as Russia dominates more and more of the daily news. Pertinent to this writing is the Kremlin’s interest in the Middle East, and how it has utilized its newfound power to extrapolate on the current situations occurring around its borders.

As Russia’s economic and political influence has grown over the last few decades, the Kremlin’s focus has shifted once again towards the Middle East amongst other critical regions. Today, Russia’s interest “in Middle Eastern affairs today is the most active it has been since the heyday of the Cold War.”<sup>4</sup> Thus far, the Kremlin has mainly grown its influence via military presence, trade deals, and soft power through agreements with various Middle Eastern leaders. The most poignant example of such military presence came in 2015 when Russia decisively committed itself to the Syrian civil war. Russia’s involvement has become its biggest combat employment since the Soviet-Afghan War, ambitiously launched despite not sharing a common

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<sup>2</sup> Olikier, et al. “United States Should Tailor Its Russia Policy to Build on Shared Views and Interests.” *RAND Corporation*, 2 Mar. 2009, p. 1. [www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG768.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG768.html).

<sup>3</sup> Hailes, Theodore C., and Air University. Pg. 1.

<sup>4</sup> United States. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on the Middle East North Africa, *Russia's Strategic Objectives in the Middle East and North Africa : Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress, First Session, June 15, 2017*. Washington: U.S. Government Office, 2017. P. 9.

border or having any kind of large independent support<sup>5</sup>. While there was some vested national security interest involved, specifically in preventing “battle hardened Russian jihadists”<sup>6</sup> from returning home if the state failed, it is apparent to most in the international system that Russia’s involvement was entirely meant to demonstrate their renewed power. This marks the first direct intervention by both the United States and Russia in a military conflict with both countries putting troops on the ground, heightening tensions to a level that has been noticeably absent for several decades. While some have claimed that the Kremlin’s involvement could lead to another “quagmire”, Putin’s decision demonstrably brought Russia back into the lens of the international system. This paper will address Russia’s presence in Syria, as well as other military ventures that it has pursued including military bases abroad such as in Syria (and it’s willingness to use other nation’s military bases<sup>7</sup>) and its own internal development of its military for foreign deployment.

### **Literature Review:**

The existing literature on great power rise and fall has a tendency to focus on the rise of new states and the fall of dying states. What it does not do, however, is that it fails to analyze the manner in which states “resurge” or return as a player in the international system. The literature on the topic of resurgent states is heavily limited despite the presence of such vernacular in newspaper articles and scholarly journals. The definition of a resurgent state and the manner in

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<sup>5</sup> Trenin, Dmitri. *What Is Russia up to in the Middle East?*, Polity Press, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/conncoll/detail.action?docID=5145619>. P. 31

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P. 37.

<sup>7</sup> This is in reference to Russia’s utilization of Iran’s Hamadan airbase in 2017 to strike targets in Syria and its agreement with Egypt which has effectively allowed Russia access to Egypt’s bases. Sly, Liz. “In the Middle East, Russia Is Back.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 5 Dec. 2018, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-the-middle-east-russia-is-back/2018/12/04/e899df30-aaf1-11e8-9a7d-cd30504ff902\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.038bdb76431f](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-the-middle-east-russia-is-back/2018/12/04/e899df30-aaf1-11e8-9a7d-cd30504ff902_story.html?utm_term=.038bdb76431f).

which states attempt to regain strength is rarely crystallized and remains more of a generalized concept than a concrete analysis. Specifically, although scholars have acknowledged the growing strength of Russia, there is a gap in the literature on the foreign policy initiatives that the Kremlin has implemented to attempt to reclaim great power status. Although seminal theories do not explicitly explain resurgent power, they remain instrumental in understanding the general process of power transitions. This literature review will first outline the seminal arguments on great power rise and fall and then it will seek to outline how these arguments might extend to resurgent states.

### **International Relations Theory:**

In understanding great power politics, it is essential to first understand the world in which states operate. Over time, different schools of thought have developed distinct models for analyzing states' behavior and intentions. Such models allow political scientists to explain why states pursue one policy or another and the manner in which they interact with other states.

One of the most central and longstanding schools of thought is the notion of Realism. Underlying this theory is the reality that anarchy remains the most defining feature of the international system in the absence of a supranational government. Such emphasis on anarchy is typically most associated with Realist thought, since Realism assumes that the world is driven by insecurity. Realist theory contends that the condition of anarchy makes security the first and foremost concern of states. Mearsheimer, one of the most well known scholars on the topic, writes that the first assumption of the international system is anarchic, although notes that this should be taken to mean that it is chaotic or disorderly. Rather, it is an ordering principle

communicating the fact that the system is comprised of independent states that have no central authority above them.<sup>8</sup> The international system “never was and is not today a world state” as stated by George Modelski, who claims that the system is a decentralized polity.<sup>9</sup> Lacking this higher authority, states are left to their own devices to protect and defend themselves from other, potentially hostile forces.

The term ‘realism’ tends to denote a pessimistic vision of the future, with little expectation of states changing their nature. Realism, as noted by Edward Carr, emphasizes the irresistible strength of existing forces, insisting that wisdom lies in accepting and adapting to these tendencies, rather than attempting to alter them.<sup>10</sup> At realism’s core is the notion that international affairs is nothing more than a struggle for power between competing, self interested states.<sup>11</sup> This struggle for power is considered to be universal, temporally and spatially, regardless of social, economic, and political conditions.<sup>12</sup>

Not all schools of thought maintain such a forlorn outlook on the international states of affairs. Liberals tend to be hopeful about the prospects of creating a safer, more interconnected world. They purport a vision of a future without war, assuming that states can overcome their differences to work together. Liberals claim that the world is on a slow but “inexorable journey away from the anarchic world” arguing that trade and finance will forge relationships between nations, and democratic norms will spread.”<sup>13</sup> Liberalism emphasizes a drive towards global markets, international organizations, cooperation. The championing minds behind such an

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<sup>8</sup> Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. P. 338

<sup>9</sup> Modelski, George. *Principles of World Politics*. New York: Free, 1972. P. 216

<sup>10</sup> Carr, Edward Hallett. *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939; an Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. London: Macmillan and, Limited, 1940. P. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. P. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among Nations; the Struggle for Power and Peace*. P. 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* P. 7.

ideology include John Locke and Immanuel Kant, convinced that states could put aside their differences to create some of the international governing bodies that exist today. Today, the scholars of liberalism envision an interconnected future in which states remain individual and sovereign, but can also cooperate through a system of shared ideals and norms for the betterment of all people.

A third body of literature is often discussed in terms of international politics, namely constructivism. A constructivist mind sees international politics as the product of persuasive ideas, cultural effects, and historical relationships to understand the current state of affairs. According to constructivism, ideas always maintain importance, because power and interest are intrinsically related to the shared knowledge that constitutes them as such.”<sup>14</sup> In essence, the world is a social construction made from the actions and beliefs of human beings. As Alexander Wendt explains, the analysis of the social constructions in international politics is to analyze interactions and the processes that these interactions produce and reproduce. These social structures shape actors’ identities and interests, as well as the significance of their material context.<sup>15</sup> Constructivism acknowledges the international system as anarchical, but claims that it is what states do within the context of that system that is most important.

While the latter two fields offer valuable insights into how the international system works, I will argue in this paper that realism retains the most relevance in understanding states’ motives. Even after the fall of the Soviet Union, in which scholars heralded the “The End of History”<sup>16</sup> and the inevitable triumph of liberal capitalist democracy, conflict endures. Kant’s

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<sup>14</sup> Wendt, Alexander. "Constructing International Politics." *International Security* 20.1 (1995): 73.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* P. 81.

<sup>16</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3-18.

perpetual peace has failed to come to fruition.<sup>17</sup> As Mearsheimer bluntly stated, “Alas, the claim that security competition and war between the great powers have been purged from the international system is wrong. Indeed, there is much evidence that the promise of everlasting peace among the great powers was stillborn.”<sup>18</sup> Mearsheimer, one of the most highly regarded scholars in the field of realism, poignantly sums up this tragic inevitability in his seminal work, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Mearsheimer writes that hopes for peace will probably not be realized due to the reality that great powers, fearing each other, are fated to clash for advantage over one another... He acknowledges the tragic irony of this situation but affirms that this scenario is bound to continue indefinitely.<sup>19</sup>

Within Realism, there is a further differentiation that seek to account for the nature of the international structure. One group of thought pursues a notion of defensive realism. This argument, advanced by political scientists such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz claims that states are not inherently aggressive, rather that their primary motives are survival and security.<sup>20</sup> Such a case purports that the preservation of balance is an intrinsic objective for most states. Hans Morgenthau distinguishes between status quo states, those states who desire to simply exist within the system as it is, and revisionist powers who look to change the international system.<sup>21</sup> However, it is important to note that even while Morgenthau admits to the presence of revisionist states, this is only a temporary status that is resolved once equilibrium is reinstated. Some scholars, such as Timofey Bordachev<sup>22</sup> and Randall Schweller,<sup>23</sup> explain

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<sup>17</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Perpetual Peace*. New York: Columbia UP, 1939.

<sup>18</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. P. 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. P. xi-xii.

<sup>20</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. 1st ed. Boston, Mass.: McGraw-Hill, 1979.

<sup>21</sup> Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among Nations; the Struggle for Power and Peace*. 4th ed. New York: Knopf, 1967.

<sup>22</sup> Bordachev, Timofey, “«Две войны» Запада и Россия”, Россия в глобальной политике, 11 July 2018, <https://globalaffairs.ru/number/Dve-voiny-Zapada-i-Rossiya-19666>



Russia's rise in such a lense. These authors argue that Russia is not a dangerous revisionist state, rather that it is working well within the international framework to develop as a nation without objectives to destabilize the international order.

This argument is not accepted by all realist scholars. Other scholars, such as John Mearsheimer<sup>24</sup> and Robert Gilpin,<sup>25</sup> represent another group of thought, that of offensive realism. This theory agrees upon the principle of security being paramount, however, it diverts from that of defensive realism in that the two arguments conflict over the question of how much power states want. Mearsheimer's ideology states that status quo powers rarely, if ever, exist in the international system, because states are constantly attempting to maximize their relative power so as to improve their security. The moment these states have the ability to alter the balance of power in favor of themselves, these states will take advantage of the opportunity to act. Thus offensive realism forwards the idea that the maximization of power is what states seek, not simply status quo. In thinking about Russia, it is clear that the model of offensive Realism is much better suited as a model in explaining Russia's great power ambitions. Such an argument is supported by Russian scholars, who view Russia's aggressive actions in the 21st century as a pursuit for great power ambitions through offensive, expansionist foreign policy.<sup>26</sup> In particular, scholars have noted Russia's offensive actions in the Middle East. This case study is explicative

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<sup>23</sup> Schweller, Randall, "Rising Powers and Revisionism in Emerging International Orders", Valdai Club, May 2015, <http://valdaiclub.com/files/11391/>

<sup>24</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.

<sup>26</sup> Such arguments are defended by scholars including Wood, Andrew "Putin and Russia in 2018-24." *The Royal Institute for International Affairs* (2018): 1-23; Trenin, Dmitri. *What Is Russia up to in the Middle East?*, Polity Press, 2017; Reshetnikov, Anatoly, "What Does Russia Mean When It Talks Greatness?" *E-International Relations*. 20 May 2018. <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/05/20/what-does-russia-mean-when-it-talks-greatness/>.

of the offensive realist perspective, and offers a clear example of Russia's attempts at regaining great power.

### **General Theories on the changes in the International System:**

To understand the changes (and continuities) of great power politics, one must understand the international system in which states operate. Gilpin explains that the international system exists for reasons similar to any social or political system, in that the actors enter social relationships and create structures to advance their political or economic interests.<sup>27</sup> The overall system typically reflects the interests of the most powerful members within the social system. Thus, according to Gilpin,<sup>28</sup> the international system begins in a state of equilibrium or stability, that is, under the presumption that no state believes that it is profitable to change the system. Change occurs when a state believes that the expected benefits will exceed the expected costs, through territorial, political, and economic expansion until the marginal costs of further change are either equal to or greater than the marginal benefits. Equilibrium is established, although Gilpin notes that there is a tendency for the economic costs of maintaining the status quo to rise faster than the economic capacity of supporting the status quo, thereby often resulting in disequilibrium. Change in the international system will continue until a new equilibrium is established, reflecting a new redistribution of powers. Gilpin's argument is interpreted by John Ikenberry who writes that the main cause of cyclical change occurs when there is an inevitable shift of power from the core to the periphery. As this shift occurs, hierarchical structures break

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<sup>27</sup> Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. P. 9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* P. 10-11.

down and competition ensues.<sup>29</sup> In essence, the systemic change refers to the replacement of a declining power by the rise of another new dominant power.

Other scholars profess a different world theory. George Modelski studies the cyclical patterns of world politics in his work, *Principles of World Politics*. Modelski defines a cycle as “a recurrent pattern in the life (or functioning) of a system.”<sup>30</sup> He further qualifies it by stating that if the recurrence takes place in a pattern that is predictable, such behavior can then be labelled as cyclical or periodic.<sup>31</sup> Modelski identifies consistent variables in each world cycle, noting the presence of a period of weak organization that dissolves into global war,<sup>32</sup> that then gives way to a new world order organized under a peace settlement. He finds that this settlement endures for approximately a generation at which point this structure again begins to break down and competitors begin to vie again for a new world order that favors the challengers in a more advantageous manner.<sup>33</sup>

When discussing the international system or a world order, political scientists also observe the polarity of the system, referring to the number of Great Powers that are influencing the system. In reality, many countries are constantly influencing the international system at any given time, therefore it might be argued that the world is intrinsically multipolar. While there is validity in this statement, the variety of polarity systems is widely recognized. For example, preceding World War 1, the world was seen as a multipolar system, as the Concert of Europe dominated the international system between several competing states. The beginning of the Cold

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<sup>29</sup> Ikenberry, G. John. *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*. P. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Modelski, George. *Principles of World Politics*. New York: Free, 1972. P. 214.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. P. 214.

<sup>32</sup> Modelski defines global wars as “conflicts that determine the constitution of the global political system”; wide-ranging and far-reaching in their consequences, they may last over a period of a generation, and in the end they give birth to a new world order.” P. 217

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. P. 217.

War ushered in a period of bipolarity, in which countries gravitated to the United States and the ideals of liberal democracy or to the USSR and the ideology of Communism. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, many scholars heralded the age of American unipolarity. Different systems entail different security considerations. For example, Mearsheimer claims that multipolar systems are more war prone than bipolar systems for several reasons. He explains that in a multipolar world, there are more opportunities for war as there are more potential conflict dyads. Furthermore, imbalances of power are more commonplace in a multipolar world resulting in great powers having a greater ability to win a war, thus making deterrence more difficult. Finally, the potential for miscalculation increases and states are more apt to make rash decisions without careful consideration of the effects of war.<sup>34</sup> Bipolar systems, as the name implies, are considered to be the most balanced as the two major forces only have to consider the motives and objectives of one main opposition. Finally, unipolarity is considered to be the least stable of all structures, since any great concentration of power threatens the security of others and results in such states working to restore a balance.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it is the system least often encountered and the moment of unipolarity often passes away hastily.

Today, there is much evidence to claim that this moment has indeed passed for the United States. The rise of China and the resurgence of Russia point to the potential of impending conflict as the United States attempts to retain its position of power. Although neither China nor Russia (or any other state for that matter) possess nearly the same economic or military might as the United States, their growing strength is nonetheless a reality. Another bipolar situation between the United States and Russia is unlikely given the current state of Russia, as well as the

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<sup>34</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. P. 5

<sup>35</sup> Wohlforth, William. "The Stability of a Unipolar World." *International Security* 24.1 (1999): 5.

number of other states that possess nuclear capabilities. Scholars are also skeptical about the concept of a multipolar future, as nonstate actors have taken on just as important a role in international affairs as states. One scholar, Richard Haas, has even gone as far as to predict a nonpolar future arguing that nation-states have lost their monopoly on power thus defeating the concept of a state driven international system.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, in considering Russia's expansionist tendencies today, it is more likely that it is an attempt to simply acquire more relative power from its competitors rather than an indication of total hegemony. Keeping in mind that this is always the long term goal of any state, Russia's actions now seem to indicate a more short term, practical objective of regaining its status as a relevant and important international actor.

### **Objectives of States:**

This segues into understanding what the primary objectives of states are. Mearsheimer claims that the overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power by pursuing the status of regional or global hegemony,<sup>37</sup> a concept that will be explained momentarily. Specifically, Mearsheimer argues that states pursue this objective by gaining power at the expense of other states.<sup>38</sup> Of course, states must consider the relative nature of the international system. All measures of power are contingent on the power of the states around them. As Gilpin writes, the abundance or security of a nation's power and riches matters little if it's neighbor possesses more.<sup>39</sup> Due to the fact that power is relative, the rise or decline of one state by definition entails the decline or rise of another. Thus states must take into account the manner in

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<sup>36</sup> Haass, Richard. "The Age of Nonpolarity." *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (2008): 44-56.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 141.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. P. 2

<sup>39</sup> Kennedy, Paul M. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers : Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. New York, NY: Random House, 1988. P. xxii.

which they can advance their own strength to lessen their neighbors. Mearsheimer elaborates, arguing that states look for opportunities to alter the balance of power in their favor by obtaining increments of power, whether through economic, diplomatic, or military means in a zero sum fashion.<sup>40</sup> This security dilemma, as it is commonly referred to as, is explained concisely by John Herz. Herz writes that as states strive to attain security from neighboring attacks, they are driven to acquire more and more power to better protect themselves. This, in turn, renders the opposing powers to become more insecure in comparison. Thus, power competition ensues, and the “vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on.”<sup>41</sup> Waltz theorizes that states’ first and foremost concern is to maintain their position in the system.<sup>42</sup> Gilpin too agrees that states first look to secure themselves in the international system. Once the position of the state is ascertained in the international system, Gilpin would argue that the second objective of states is to maximize their influence over the behavior of rival states whether through threats, coercion, alliances, or exclusive spheres of influence. This behavior allows states to create an international environment of which they design the rules of the system. This system is made to be conducive to the fulfillment of the state’s political, economic, and ideological interests.<sup>43</sup> This follows in tandem with Gilpin’s other understanding of states’ objectives, that is to influence the world economy and the international division of labor in an advantageous manner.<sup>44</sup>

Many scholars argue that the ultimate goal of states is to become a hegemon. Scholars define hegemony as “the leadership of one state (the hegemon) over other states in the system.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. P. 34.

<sup>41</sup> Herz, John H. "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma." *World Politics* 2.2 (1950): 157

<sup>42</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. P. 126.

<sup>43</sup> Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. P. 24

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. P. 24.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. P. 116.

Mearsheimer classifies hegemons as the sole great power in the system.<sup>46</sup> He further delineates by stating that such a power should be so distinguished from its peers that no other state would have the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it.<sup>47</sup> Scholars note a distinction between global hegemons, those powers who dominate the entire international system, and regional hegemons, those which dominate distinct geographical areas.<sup>48</sup> The United States, for example, is and has been a regional hegemon because it remains unchallenged for superiority by other countries in the northern hemisphere. All other states, therefore, either aim to achieve this status, or to surpass it by becoming the strongest player in the international system.

### **Great Power Status:**

Although nations aspire to be hegemons, more often states reach the title of “Great power.” Scholars vary broadly on how they choose to label a state as a great power. Power itself is a difficult concept to quantify. As acknowledged by Levy, many scholars have chosen either not to attempt to define the concept or have made little to no effort to translate ambiguous concepts into meaningful operational criteria.<sup>49</sup> Robert L. Rothstein, for example, suggests that the lack of a clear definition could be due to the commonly held belief that such a distinction between Great Powers and other, weaker states is self-evident, therefore not requiring exact quantitative variables.<sup>50</sup> Waltz makes a similar comment, making a comparison between counting the number of great powers in an era to counting how many major firms populate an

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<sup>46</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. P. 2

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. P. 97.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. P. 97.

<sup>49</sup> Levy, Jack S. *War in the Modern Great Power System*. UP of Kentucky, 2015. P. 10.

<sup>50</sup> Rothstein, Robert L., and Columbia University. Institute of War Peace Studies. *Alliances and Small Powers*. New York: Columbia UP, 1968. P. 14.

oligopolistic sector of an economy.<sup>51</sup> His argument is that an understanding of great power status often comes from common sense but can be difficult to quantify. Scholars also contend with when a Great Power has successfully reached the status of greatness necessary for qualification into the “common sense” grouping. It seems apparent that it is more of a general process rather than the result of a specific or single event. Some scholars only consider changes over the course of one century to another.<sup>52</sup> Other scholars such as Michael Haas constructed a set of entry and departure dates that were instrumental in formulating system transformation over the last three centuries.<sup>53</sup> Most often, these dates correlate to the end of a decisive war for the aforementioned reasons of military capability being so crucial in great power status. Again, it is more frequently correlated with long term development and noticeable economic shifts rather than a specific date that demarcated a great power’s status.

Over time, scholars have attempted to identify the markers of state power and the variables that contribute to this power. In Gilpin’s work, he defines the power of a state simply in terms of the military, economic, and technological capabilities of states.<sup>54</sup> E.H. Carr, on the other hand, focuses on a nation's “power of opinion”, referring to the intangible psychological aspects of powers within international relations.<sup>55</sup> Modelski characterizes great or world powers as those that control or substantially control the global political system. According to Modelski, these powers do not control national or local political systems or processes, rather the identity, values, and resources of that power shape the international system.<sup>56</sup> Mearsheimer states that power

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<sup>51</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. P. 131.

<sup>52</sup> Wright, Quincy. *A Study of War*. Chicago, Ill.: U of Chicago, 1942. P. 649.

<sup>53</sup> Haas, Michael. "International Subsystems: Stability and Polarity." *The American Political Science Review* 64.1 (1970): 102.

<sup>54</sup> Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. P. 13-14

<sup>55</sup> Carr, Edward Hallett. *The New Society*. London: Macmillan, 1951. P. 132

<sup>56</sup> Modelski, George. *Principles of World Politics*. New York: Free, 1972. P. 216



represents nothing other than the specific assets or material resources that are available to the country, however the actual practical use of that power is a state's ability to force another to do something in accordance to the first power's desires.<sup>57</sup> Other variables such as leadership, strategic ability, regime type, etc., are considered integral to power by other scholars. For example, Henry Kissinger once claimed, "Military muscle does not guarantee political influence. Economic giants can be militarily weak, and military strength may not be able to obscure economic weakness. Countries can exert political influence even when they have neither military nor economic strength."<sup>58</sup>

### **Explanatory Variables of Great Power:**

Each of these aforementioned definitions of great power are largely theoretical. However, scholars have also made an effort to identify and label certain explanatory variables which separate Great Powers from their weaker counterparts. As previously stated, military power is often the primary characteristic of a Great Power. Indeed, the majority of scholars most directly correlate Great power status with military might. For example, Alan Taylor argues that the test of a Great Power is their preparation for war.<sup>59</sup> David Singer and Thomas Cusack further this notion by claiming that the most apparent attribute of a great power is its ability to wage war at frequent intervals with a high success rate.<sup>60</sup> Hans Morgenthau claims that armed strength as a threat or a

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<sup>57</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. P. 57

<sup>58</sup> Kissinger, Henry, "Address by Secretary of State Kissinger", *Office of the Historian*, October 8, 1973. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v38p1/d19>

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, A. J. P. *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1954. Oxford History of Modern Europe. P. xxiv.

<sup>60</sup> Singer, J. David and Thomas Cusack (1981). "Periodicity, Inexorability, and Steermanship in International War." In *From National Development to Global Community* (Richard Merritt and Bruce M. Russett, eds). London: Allen & Unwin.

potentiality is the most important material factor making for the political power of a nation.”<sup>61</sup> Leopold Ranke purported that a Great Power must have the capability to fight against any other power, even if they are united,<sup>62</sup> although several scholars have since criticized the claim as being too sweeping in terms of its criterion. Levy counters Ranke’s definition, arguing that it is too exclusionary.<sup>63</sup> The conversation has continued with the introduction of new authors who have modified Ranke’s concept. For example, Michael Hass rectifies the original definition by stating that a Great Power should not be defeated in battle by another single power, however, a combination of other powers could defeat said Great Power.<sup>64</sup> Although this definition does not wholly clarify the ambiguity of great statehood, it does more fairly acknowledge the role that many powers play in the world stage today. To understand the relationship between multiple existing Great Powers, Martin Wight quantifies a Great Power as one that could take on another Great power in single combat.<sup>65</sup> Mearsheimer argues that the qualification of a great power is dependent on a state possessing sufficient military assets to challenge the most powerful state in the system in an all out conventional war. He modifies this by saying that the candidate does not need to win, however, it must have some reasonable prospect of creating a war of attrition that leaves the dominant state severely weakened.<sup>66</sup> Rothstein takes the position that a Great Power has the luxury of relying on its own capabilities to provide for its security, whereas small powers must rely on external alliances and international institutions.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Stanley Hoffman argues

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<sup>61</sup> Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among Nations; the Struggle for Power and Peace*. P. 14

<sup>62</sup> Ranke, Leopold Von, and Roger. Wines. *The Secret of World History : Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*. New York: Fordham UP, 1981. P. 86.

<sup>63</sup> Levy, Jack S. *War in the Modern Great Power System*. P. 11.

<sup>64</sup> Haas, Michael. "International Subsystems: Stability and Polarity." P. 122.

<sup>65</sup> Wight, Martin. *Power Politics*. London, New York: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1949. Print. "Looking Forward" Pamphlets ; No. 8. P. 18.

<sup>66</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. P. 5.

<sup>67</sup> Rothstein, Robert L., and Columbia University. Institute of War Peace Studies. *Alliances and Small Powers*. New York: Columbia UP, 1968. P. 24-29.

Great Powers provide for their security without severely undermining their independence as opposed to small powers which are forced to choose between security and autonomy.<sup>68</sup>

That being said, scholars consider other variables beyond pure military might, as well as the variables that contribute to such strength. Rob de Wijk characterises a country's power by its population size, territory, economy, military apparatus, technology, and political and strategic culture.<sup>69</sup> Mearsheimer defines a subset of state power, identified as latent power. Latent power refers to the societal resources available to states that can be utilized to build military forces. The most important examples of these resources, according to Mearsheimer, are the size of a state's population and the wealth of the nation.<sup>70</sup> He distinguishes latent wealth from mobilizable wealth, which he defines as "the economic resources a state has at its disposal to build military forces."<sup>71</sup> These resources must be immediately available for defense expenditure as the name implies. Waltz claims that the rank of a nation depends on a variety of factors including the size of their population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence.<sup>72</sup> Population size has long been considered a critical element to great power status because according to some scholars, only large populations can produce great wealth which is the building block of military power.<sup>73</sup> Wealth is important because money and technology are essential in equipping, training, and modernizing a state's fighting forces. Furthermore, the cost of waging great power wars are enormous...Accordingly, the great powers

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<sup>68</sup> Hoffmann, Stanley. *The State of War; Essays on the Theory and Practice of International Politics*. New York: Praeger, 1965.

<sup>69</sup> De Wijk, Rob. *Power Politics How China and Russia Reshape the World*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2016. P. 9.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. P. 61

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. P. 62

<sup>72</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. P. 131.

<sup>73</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. P. 61.

in the international system are invariably among the world's wealthiest states.<sup>74</sup> This is further supported by Davis and North who claim that a steady rate of economic growth, as well as a noticeable population shift might be the most significant cause of political change over a long period of time.<sup>75</sup> Paul Kennedy's study of Great Powers find a clear connection in the long run between an individual Great Powers economic rise its growth as an important military power.<sup>76</sup> For example, Kennedy considers the move in trade flows from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and northwestern Europe from the 16th century forward, finding that such an economic shift "heralded the rise of new Great Powers which would one day have a decisive impact upon the military/territorial order."<sup>77</sup>

### **Russian Great Power:**

The story of Russian Great Power is typically traced to the reign of Peter the Great whose unification and modernization of the country catapulted the nation's rise.<sup>78</sup> Jack Levy goes as far as to mark 1721 as a watershed year, marking Russia's entrance into the modern great power system.<sup>79</sup> Other authors, such as Iver Neumann, mark Russia's attainment of great power status as following the Napoleonic Wars in 1815.<sup>80</sup> While dates are debated its indisputable that the Russian state has been instrumental in international history. Its vast geography, in addition to its

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. P. 61.

<sup>75</sup> Davis, Lance, and Douglass North. "Institutional Change and American Economic Growth: A First Step Towards a Theory of Institutional Innovation." *The Journal of Economic History* 30.1 (1970): 141. This is also argued by Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. P. 55-56.

<sup>76</sup> Kennedy, Paul M. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers : Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. P. xxii.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. P. xxii.

<sup>78</sup> Wilson, Derek. Peter the Great. 1st U.S. ed., St. Martin's Press, 2010; Bushkovitch, Paul. *A Concise History of Russia*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

<sup>79</sup> Levy, Jack S. *War in the Modern Great Power System*. P. 47.

<sup>80</sup> Neumann, Iver B. "Russia as a Great Power, 1815–2007." *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2008, pp. 128–151.

sizable population and economic stature marked Russia as a main competitor in international politics up until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The 1990s in Russia were marked by extreme recession, in terms of economy and military strength. GDP growth remained in the negative for almost the entire decade as inflation soared and incomes plummeted.<sup>81</sup> In the military sector, weapons spending in 1992 was around 75% less than in 1988 and almost all of Russia's arms production had paused.<sup>82</sup> Its status as a "Great Power" seemed to wane as internal problems overrode the states' ability to exert itself on the international stage.

In general, scholars account for great power decline by identifying several factors. Most pertinent to a state's decline is its economic situation. Gilpin supports this statement, arguing that "perhaps the most significant changes that undermine the power of the dominant state are structural changes in its economy."<sup>83</sup> Economic stagnation results in the erosion of military strength, economic inefficiency, and decline in military and economic competitiveness.<sup>84</sup> Ikenberry extracts five specific processes from Gilpin's research: the declining rates of economic growth; rising costs of the military; the tendency for public and private consumption to increase; the trend of economic activity to transition to services; and the "corrupting influence of affluence."<sup>85</sup> Each of these variables erode the state's ability to maintain dominance or hegemony. Most specifically, a country's power begins to decline when it begins to divert its resources away from productive investment and instead towards system maintenance and

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<sup>81</sup> Aris, Ben, and Ivan Tkachev. "Long Read: 20 Years of Russia's Economy Under Putin, in Numbers." *The Moscow Times*, The Moscow Times, 6 Dec. 2019,

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/19/long-read-russias-economy-under-putin-in-numbers-a66924>.

<sup>82</sup> "Russian Military Budget." *Russian Military Spending*, <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/agency/mo-budget.htm>.

<sup>83</sup> Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. P. 159.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* P. 159.

<sup>85</sup> Ikenberry, G. John. *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*. P. 115-116. Taken from Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. Chapter 4.

protection. Paul Kennedy argues that “Great Powers in relative decline instinctively respond by spending more on ‘security,’ and thereby divert potential resources from ‘investment’ and compound their long-term dilemma.”<sup>86</sup> In exerting more resources on system maintenance, states inherently compromise economic growth. It becomes more difficult to generate the necessary revenue for protection costs, while at the same time protection costs rise in tandem. The preservation of status quo dominance becomes more tenuous and eventually the international system enters a state of disequilibrium. According to Gilpin, “disequilibrium entails a disjuncture between the basic components of the existing international system and the capacity of the dominant state or states to maintain the system, between the costs of defending the existing distribution of territory, spheres of influence, rules of the system, and international economy, on the one hand, and the revenues necessary to finance these arrangements. This divergence between costs and resources in turn produces a ‘fiscal crisis’ for the dominant power or powers. The consequence of continuing disequilibrium and of the financial drain it entails if it is not resolved is the eventual economic and political decline of the dominant power.”<sup>87</sup> A rising economic power then typically takes advantage of the state of affairs and surpasses the declining power thus creating a new balance of power.

Russia’s fall was perhaps more unique than others, as it was the endgame of an ideological war that had existed for decades. No expert or scholar foresaw the coming demise of the Soviet Union, although in hindsight scholars have noted several explanatory variables. One school of thought places the most emphasis on economic stagnation as causing the fall, whereas

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<sup>86</sup> Kennedy, Paul M. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers : Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. P. xxiii.

<sup>87</sup> Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. P. 157.

another would highlight social and intellectual modernization as the cause.<sup>88</sup> Internal pressures certainly played a role, as did the permittance of elections with a multi-party system which paved the way for democratization. The introduction of the policies of glasnost and perestroika were also considered integral to loosening the control of the authoritarian state over the market and over its satellite states. The failure to reform the market resulted in an accumulation of economic pressure that eventually became unsustainable. The outcome in 1991 was the end of an empire and the death of an ideology. The international bipolar system had ended and the balance of power shifted to the United States which then stood alone as the singular hegemon remaining.

### **The Literature on Resurgence and the Middle East:**

While the literature is well developed on the topic of great power status and the moments in which states become great powers, there is a gap in the literature on the topic of “resurgent powers”. Although the term “resurgent Russia” is used frequently in headlines and news articles, the literature on resurgent states as a theme are scarce. The word resurgence is defined as “an increase or revival after a period of little activity, popularity, or occurrence.”<sup>89</sup> While the aforementioned literature speaks to the rise and fall of great powers, it does little to inform us on the topic of “resurgence” or how great powers return from periods of ruin. Indeed, after Russia’s collapse, many labelled the nation as permanently deceased. Some prescient scholars, such as Bruce Porter, warned of the need to alter this mentality. Quoting Alexis Tocqueville, Porter reminds us that “the essential ingredients of state power over the long run provide a much needed

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<sup>88</sup> The role of economic stagnation is examined by Vladimir Kontorovich whereas the role of social and intellectual modernization is considered by Francis Fukuyama in: Gvosdev, Nikolas K. *The Strange Death of Soviet Communism : a Postscript*. Transaction Publishers, 2008.

<sup>89</sup> “Resurgence: Definition of Resurgence by Lexico.” *Lexico Dictionaries | English*, Lexico Dictionaries, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/resurgence>.

corrective, for the ingredients ultimately matter more than economic fluctuations, political crises, or near-term shifts in the military balance.”<sup>90</sup>

Only as the 21st century unfolded did the conversation surrounding “resurgence” begin to surface. In reference to Russia, it is clear that scholars, journalists, and experts are referring to its revived presence in the international system from a geopolitical standpoint. It is poorly defined in terms of precise, identifiable variables. Instead, scholars seem to refer to a general, identifiable trend of outward international aggression. Aggarwal and Govella defend their claim that Russian behavior is resurgent because they argue that the qualities of Russia’s current foreign policy is focused on bolstering Russia’s prestige, encouraging economic recovery, and extending influence into its “near abroad”.<sup>91</sup> Many scholars see this as an attempt to regain its lost great power status as a distinctive marker of prestige and recognition.

In beginning to redevelop its international prowess, the Russian government has looked to capitalize upon its regional geopolitical situation. Pertinent to Russia’s developing presence is the Kremlin’s interest in the Middle East, and how it has utilized its newfound power to capitalize on the current events occurring around its borders. Such interest has become so intense that it has become “the most active it has been since the heyday of the Cold War.”<sup>92</sup> The Middle East is an integral geopolitical location in Russia’s resurgent objectives. This particular focus has much to do with the Middle East’s central location between Africa, Asia, and Europe, as well its enormous energy resources, and its volatile political instability in recent years. Russia has finally

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<sup>90</sup> Porter, Bruce D. “The Coming Resurgence of Russia.” *The National Interest*, no. 23, 1991, pp. 14.

<sup>91</sup> Aggarwal, Vinod K., and Kristi. Govella. *Responding to a Resurgent Russia Russian Policy and Responses from the European Union and the United States*. 1. ed., Springer New York : Imprint: Springer, 2012. P. 7.

<sup>92</sup> United States. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on the Middle East North Africa, Author. *Russia's Strategic Objectives in the Middle East and North Africa : Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress, First Session, June 15, 2017*. Washington: U.S. Government Office, 2017. Web. pg. 9



succeeded in opposing the United States in its previously dominant role in the region. Indeed, “Nowhere did Russia’s reemergence on the world stage have more impact than the turbulent Middle East.”<sup>93</sup> The Middle East has been integral to Russia’s offensive foreign policy, fomenting its resurgence back into the international arena.

Although Russia has worked painstakingly to rebuild its influence and standing in the region since the mid-2000s, its efforts only began to pay off meaningfully in the wake of the Arab Spring at which point Russia’s resurgence was imminent, only becoming more apparent during its combat deployment in 2015.<sup>94</sup> Most western critics have claimed that these changes are the result of Putin being a “deliberately destructive player in the Middle East by manipulating the untraditional but potentially dangerous post-Cold War order to strengthen its own standing in the world.”<sup>95</sup> There is consensus that Russia often acts in an attempt to insert itself on the international stage at the expense of the United States, its longtime rival, in a zero-sum game fashion.<sup>96</sup> Having been treated as an irrelevant player in 2003, when the United States decided to invade Iraq, and then again in 2011 when the United Nations decided to depose Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, it is not surprising that the Kremlin has developed this zero-sum game mentality. Scholars label Russia’s foreign policy style in the Middle East as coming from a place of “pragmatism and political realism, characterized by a willingness to deal with all relevant players, treating no one wholly as an ally or wholly as an adversary...maintaining a clear focus

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<sup>93</sup> Nizameddin, Talal. *Putin's New Order in the Middle East*. Hurst & Company, 2013. P. vii.

<sup>94</sup> Popescu, Nicu, and Stanislav Secieru. *Russia's Return to the Middle East Building Sandcastles?* Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2018. Chaillot Paper (Online), N° 146, July 2018. P. 5.

<sup>95</sup> Nizameddin, Talal. *Putin's New Order in the Middle East*. London: Hurst &, 2013. P. 5.

<sup>96</sup> Hall, Steven L. “Intelligence Sharing With Russia: A Practitioner's Perspective.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/02/09/intelligence-sharing-with-russia-practitioner-s-perspective-pub-67962>.

on Russia's own national interests."<sup>97</sup> While Russian officials often claim today that their main concern stems from respect for human rights and international law, most are cognizant of the fact that this is most likely not true. Rather, scholars today mostly agree that while Russia puts efforts forth "to act under the guise of 'humanitarian intervention'"<sup>98</sup> and claims to endorse international law and cooperation,<sup>99</sup> its focus is most likely more towards strengthening its international prestige and to create a balance of power in the world, "despite all the rhetoric in Moscow of endorsing international law and cooperation."

Out of the variety of events that have occurred in recent years "Moscow in the first decade of the twenty-first century stood accused of passing on nuclear technology (Iran); illicit sales of advanced conventional weapons (Iran, Syria, Hezbollah); hindering UN Resolutions on the Security Council; political cover and support for terrorist organizations ( Hamas, Hezbollah); and blocking peaceful democratic development (Syria, Lebanon and indirectly Iraq)."<sup>100</sup> Russia's new role and identity had its roots in the late Yeltsin era, but the Putin era witnessed the emergence of an assertive Russia that by 2013 subtly deflated the balloon of US power by cleverly manipulating developments in the Middle East including Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Syrian revolution and, other regional issues."<sup>101</sup> Many scholars agree that "Russia's comeback in the Middle East is real and incontestable."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Trenin, Dmitri "What Drives Russia's Policy in the Middle East?", in Popescu, Nicu and Secieru, Stanislav, *Russia's Return to the Middle East Building Sandcastles?* Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2018. Chaillot Paper (Online), N° 146, July 2018. P. 21

<sup>98</sup> White, S. (2006) Russia: diminished power. In: Fawn, R. and Hinnebusch, R.A. (eds.) *The Iraq War: Causes and Consequences*. Series: The Middle East in the International System. Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, CO, p. 72.

<sup>99</sup> Nizameddin, Talal. *Putin's New Order in the Middle East*. London: Hurst &, 2013. P. 5.

<sup>100</sup> Nizameddin, Talal. *Putin's New Order in the Middle East*. London: Hurst &, 2013. P. 5.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. P. vii.

<sup>102</sup> Popescu, Nicu, and Stanislav Secieru. *Russia's Return to the Middle East Building Sandcastles?* Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2018. Chaillot Paper (Online), N° 146, July 2018. P. 109.

Aside from the current instability within certain regions of the Middle East, Russian statesmen have long prioritized the maintenance of strong relationships with the states which comprise the Middle East. There are a variety of factors that have contributed to this preoccupation. The first reason comes simply from the proximity of the Arab world to the southern border of Russia. The Russians often discuss this in terms of Russia's "soft underbelly"<sup>103</sup> an area that is often prone to be porous and less secure. Although there is some buffer from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), these countries too are often exposed to permeable borderlines<sup>104</sup> thus creating a problem for Moscow. Having lost the former Soviet state buffers, along with the rise of terrorism, has reamplified the need to secure the south. Russia's worries have "long focused on the possibility that political instability in a neighboring country will involve Russia in violent unrest. Russia also fears that political change in those countries is a harbinger of instability to come within its own borders."<sup>105</sup> The notion of prioritizing the southern border was heavily popularized by one of Russia's most famous statesmen, Yevgeny Primakov, who is credited with giving "a clear formulation of Russian foreign policy and the introduction of new ideas and directions during his tenure as Foreign Minister."<sup>106</sup> Primakov, in particular, had been intent on emphasizing Russia's greatness within global affairs and had a particular interest in the Middle East after the immediate fall of the

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<sup>103</sup> Interview by Yevgeny Primakov in the Italian journal *Limes*, June-September 1996, in *FBIS - Central WueAI* (June 13, 1996): 25.

<sup>104</sup> Stephen T. Blank, "Russia's Return to Mid East. Diplomacy (How New is the New Russia?)," *Orbis*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Fall 1996): 5

<sup>105</sup> Olikier, Olga et al., "Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications", Rand Corporation, 2009, p. xv. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND\\_MG768.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG768.pdf)

<sup>106</sup> V. Kolossov, "Geopoliticheskiye polozhenie Rossii," *Polis*, no. 3 (2000): 59

Soviet Union, however his efforts were stymied by the domestic crises within Russia during the time, and so failed to enact much policy outside of Russia's immediate borders.<sup>107</sup>

Another natural reason for Russia to focus its foreign policy on the Middle East has historically been its desire to access warm water ports. Russia already has access to the eastern area of the Black Sea's coastline, thus providing a waterway to the Mediterranean sea. However, Arab Mediterranean states "are located close to transportation lines crucial for Russian relations with the southern hemisphere, and they represent an important strategic interest to Moscow."<sup>108</sup> The centrality of the eastern Mediterranean has been pertinent to Russian strategic thought since 1770 when the tsars first gained access to the waters and it has remained a central theme of national interest since then.<sup>109</sup> Today, there is plenty of evidence which supports the claim that "Putin's Russia is determined to have access to the warm seas and the world's oceans."<sup>110</sup>

The Middle East's notoriety around oil, which has attracted foreign actors for decades, has also been a focal point of Russian foreign policy. Russia itself is one of the world's major oil-producing nations and so communication between Moscow and top oil-producing states in the Arab states is inexorable. Currently, Russia and MENA "sit on 60% and 63% of the world's proven oil and gas reserves, respectively, and produce half of the world's oil and nearly 40% of its gas... Any cooperation between these two giant players will, therefore, have significant implications for global oil and gas markets."<sup>111</sup> The potential for lucrative trade opportunities has

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<sup>107</sup> Olga Aleksandrova, "The 'Third World' in Russian Foreign Policy," *Aussenpolitik*, 3 (1996): 249.

<sup>108</sup> Kreutz, Andrej. *Russia in the Middle East : Friend or Foe?* Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2007. P. 11.

<sup>109</sup> Klieman, Aaron S. *Soviet Russia and the Middle East*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1970. Print. Studies in International Affairs (Washington Center of Foreign Policy Research) ; No. 14. P. 27

<sup>110</sup> Kreutz, Andrej. *Russia in the Middle East : Friend or Foe?* Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2007. P. 146

<sup>111</sup> *BP Statistical Review of World Energy (2018)*,

<http://https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/en/corporate/pdf/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-201>

created a strong incentive for Russia to focus on Gulf Cooperation Council countries, with whom Russia can have a stake in the international oil and gas economy.

Another, less apparent fixation on the Middle East has to do with Russia's expansive Muslim population. Russia is made up of about one hundred ethno national groups of which the Islamic community makes up more than 15 percent out of the entire population.<sup>112</sup> This population has grown faster than any others within the Russian population and it has been coupled with a shrinking ethnic Russian population.<sup>113</sup> In comparison to EU member states, Russia has the largest per capita of citizens who avow to being Islamic.<sup>114</sup> Although this is not as prominently noticed as a factor for Russian foreign policy, "Russia, Islam, and Russia's Muslim peoples have influenced one another for nearly a thousand years."<sup>115</sup> This has become a more prevalent concern for Russia in recent years, as the rise of groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS has resulted in an immense amount of terrorist attacks internationally. For example, Russia's recent attempts to work with Iran has been both "because it provides them greater influence in the Middle East while also acting as a strategic buffer against radical Islam, a threat which is of great concern to Russia."<sup>116</sup> Once fighting broke out in Syria, this became even more of a priority for

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[8-full-report.pdf](#) and Nakhle, Carole, "Russia's Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East," Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles? Chaillot Papers No. 146, July 2018, p. 30

<sup>112</sup> Kreutz, Andrej. *Russia in the Middle East : Friend or Foe?* Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2007. P. 2.

<sup>113</sup> Kreutz, Andrej. *Russia in the Middle East : Friend or Foe?* Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2007. P. 150 and Hailes, Theodore, et al, "Resurgent Russia in 2030: Challenges for the USAF" Occasional Paper No. 66, Center for Strategy and Technology Air War College, September 2009, P. 12

<sup>114</sup> Hailes, Theodore, et al, "Resurgent Russia in 2030: Challenges for the USAF" Occasional Paper No. 66, Center for Strategy and Technology Air War College, September 2009, P. 13.

<sup>115</sup> Hunter, Shireen J., *Islam in Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004) p. 424.

<sup>116</sup> United States. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on the Middle East North Africa, Author. *Russia's Strategic Objectives in the Middle East and North Africa : Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress, First Session, June 15, 2017.* Washington: U.S. Government Office, 2017. Web. p. 6-7.

Russian officials who feared that the return of battle-hardened Russian jihadists (which numbered up to 7,000 fighters) would return to the country and destabilize internal politics.<sup>117</sup>

While efforts to improve relations in the Middle East have occurred since the fall of the Soviet Union, many note the most drastic changes following the events of the Arab Spring. Although Russia has worked painstakingly to rebuild its influence and standing in the region since the mid-2000s, its efforts only began to pay off meaningfully in the wake of the Arab Spring at which point Russia's resurgence was imminent, only becoming more apparent during its combat deployment in 2015.<sup>118</sup> Most Western critics have claimed that these changes are the result of Putin being a “deliberately destructive player in the Middle East by manipulating the untraditional but potentially dangerous post-Cold War order to strengthen its own standing in the world.”<sup>119</sup> Admittedly, there is quite a bit of consensus that Russia often acts in an attempt to insert itself on the international stage at the expense of the United States, its longtime rival, in a zero-sum game fashion.<sup>120</sup> Having been treated as an irrelevant player in 2003, when the United States decided to invade Iraq, and then again in 2011 when the United Nations decided to depose Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, it is not surprising that the Kremlin has developed this zero-sum game mentality.

It is also important to note that the majority of Russia's foreign policy initiatives in the Middle East do not come from a place of camaraderie. Despite the lengthy history between the

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<sup>117</sup> Trenin, Dmitri. *What Is Russia up to in the Middle East?*, Polity Press, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/conncoll/detail.action?docID=5145619>. P. 35.

<sup>118</sup> Popescu, Nicu, and Stanislav Secieru. *Russia's Return to the Middle East Building Sandcastles?* Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2018. Chaillot Paper (Online), N° 146, July 2018. P. 5.

<sup>119</sup> Nizameddin, Talal. *Putin's New Order in the Middle East*. London: Hurst &, 2013. P. 5.

<sup>120</sup> Hall, Steven L. “Intelligence Sharing With Russia: A Practitioner's Perspective.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/02/09/intelligence-sharing-with-russia-practitioner-s-perspective-pub-67962>.

regions, even during the reign of the Soviet Union, scholars admitted that, “Soviet policy towards the Arabs does not appear to conform with the traditional theory of alliances - rather than valuing the Arabs for any positive contribution or single military strength, it is more likely their weakness that has induced such Soviet support ...Arab political instability, social contradictions, economic deficiencies, and military vulnerability have been exploited by the Soviet Union to secure a wide range of objectives, of which strategic mobility is certainly among the most prominent.”<sup>121</sup> This claim was further supported by other research, which claimed, “Moscow’s aims in the Middle East are the traditional aims of most great powers: to exclude its rivals from the area, to promote its foreign policy interests broadly, and to assure itself of the resources and strategic position essential to its security. All other aims, interests, and policy positions are subordinate to and derivative from these central aims. Moscow has no intrinsic interest in either stability or instability, peace or war, or, to take a more specific issue, a Palestinian state or none at all. Its preferences on these issues are subject to change, depending on its perceptions as to what will best further its core aims.”<sup>122</sup> Scholars label Russia’s foreign policy style in the Middle East as coming from a place of “pragmatism and political realism, characterized by a willingness to deal with all relevant players, treating no one wholly as an ally or wholly as an adversary...maintaining a clear focus on Russia’s own national interests.”<sup>123</sup> While Russian officials often claim today that their main concern stems from respect for human rights and international law, most are cognizant of the fact that this is most likely not legitimate.

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<sup>121</sup> Klieman, Aaron S. *Soviet Russia and the Middle East*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1970. Print. Studies in International Affairs (Washington Center of Foreign Policy Research) ; No. 14. P. 12.

<sup>122</sup> Ramet, Sabrina P. *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship since 1955 : A Troubled Alliance*. Boulder: Westview, 1990. P. 3

<sup>123</sup> Trenin, Dmitri “What Drives Russia’s Policy in the Middle East?”, in Popescu, Nicu and Secrieru, Stanislav, *Russia’s Return to the Middle East Building Sandcastles?* Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2018. Chaillot Paper (Online), N° 146, July 2018. P. 21

Rather, scholars today mostly agree that while Russia puts efforts forth “to act under the guise of ‘humanitarian intervention’<sup>124</sup> and claims to endorse international law and cooperation<sup>125</sup>”, its focus is most likely more towards strengthening its international prestige and to create a balance of power in the world, “despite all the rhetoric in Moscow of endorsing international law and cooperation.”

### **Analysis:**

#### **Russia’s Military Interventionism:**

In terms of *how* Russia has succeeded in reinserting itself within the region, it has pursued a variety of foreign policy strategies. Amongst these, the most obvious has been Russia’s direct military presence in the region. The most poignant example of such military presence came in 2015 when Russia decisively committed itself to the Syrian civil war. Russia’s involvement has become its biggest combat employment since the Soviet-Afghan War, ambitiously launched despite not sharing a common border or having any kind of large independent support<sup>126</sup>. While there was some vested national security interest involved, specifically in preventing the aforementioned “battle hardened Russian jihadists” from returning home if the state failed, it is apparent to most in the international system that Russia’s involvement was entirely meant to demonstrate their renewed power. This marks the first direct intervention by both the United States and Russia in a military conflict with both countries putting troops on the ground, heightening tensions to a level that has been noticeably absent for several decades. Russia did not originally have specific interests in the country from an oil or

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<sup>124</sup> White, S. (2006) Russia: diminished power. In: Fawn, R. and Hinnebusch, R.A. (eds.) *The Iraq War: Causes and Consequences*. Series: The Middle East in the International System. Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, CO, p. 72.

<sup>125</sup> Nizameddin, Talal. *Putin's New Order in the Middle East*. London: Hurst &, 2013. P. 5.

<sup>126</sup> Trenin, Dmitri. *What Is Russia up to in the Middle East?*, Polity Press, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/conncoll/detail.action?docID=5145619>. P. 31



trade standpoint, nor was it in a position to expend a lot of resources.<sup>127</sup> Regardless of this, Vladimir Putin made clear the fact that “Syria would be no Libya.”<sup>128</sup> Importantly, the intervention cost Russia little, requiring some thirty to forty combat aircraft, approximately twenty helicopters, a few hundred mercenaries, and between 4,000-6,000 ground troops.<sup>129</sup> Estimates surrounding the cost of the military operation in the first 20 months lands around only \$2.4 billion, an infinitesimal cost in comparison to the \$50 billion annual budget of the Russian Ministry of Defense.<sup>130</sup>

There are plenty of indicators of successful payoffs for Russia. the Kremlin’s decision to act unilaterally in the Syrian civil war broke it out of its political isolation and forced the United States to restore communication with Russian military personnel.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, the operation manifested considerable leverage against the United States, decisively returning Moscow to an important player in power politics. As a result of the Kremlin’s intervention, “There is no question that Russia’s relatively modest outlay of military power in Syria has paid off handsomely, and that the Russian military has largely run the show.”<sup>132</sup> What might have been a quick U.S. or NATO intervention to remove Bashar Al-Assad from power became a long drawn out conflict between two strong, rival powers. In 2015, Assad only retained control over approximately one sixth of the country’s territory. By the spring of 2018, he held no less than

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid. P. 32

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. P. 33.

<sup>129</sup> Weiss, Andrew S., and Nicole Ng. “Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/20/collision-avoidance-lessons-of-u.s.-and-russian-operations-in-syria-pub-78571>.

<sup>130</sup> Lavrov, Anton “Russia in Syria: A Military Analysis”, in: Popescu, Nicu, and Stanislav Secieru. *Russia’s Return to the Middle East Building Sandcastles?* Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2018. Chaillot Paper (Online), N° 146, July 2018. P. 52

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. P. 49.

<sup>132</sup> Weiss, Andrew S., and Nicole Ng. “Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria.”

57% of the territory and had seized control over principle rebel stronghold.<sup>133</sup> In exchange for Putin's support, Damascus signed onto a deal promising Russia access to its air and naval bases for another 49 years.<sup>134</sup> This access has established Russia in a region far from home, giving it entry into an airbase with air-bridges routes over Iran and Iraq, as well as a sea-bridge route to the Black Sea. Such lenient accessibility it considered unprecedented, especially in the case of a non-expeditionary military.<sup>135</sup> In the early stages of the war, Russia also secured the Khmeimim air base in Syria, while also permanently settling into the naval facility in Tartus. Such integration in the region has allowed Russia to train military forces and it has also led to a further agreement between Russia and Egypt, permitting Russia to use Egyptian air bases when the need arises.<sup>136</sup> In 2017, reports indicated that Russia had potential plans to set up a base at the border of Libya and Egypt, "ensuring that Russia ties itself to the energy and military sectors of many countries in the region, giving him leverage and influence."<sup>137</sup>

Another striking advantage for the Kremlin has been its ability to test new weapons with few casualties and train its personnel. Since the beginning of 2018, there has been a recorded number of 210 new weapons tested and evaluated in Syria.<sup>138</sup> Finally, Russia's active role in Syria has allowed "Russian military officers are able to hone their combat and tactical skills in Syria. They work in the country on short 2-3 month shifts. This has allowed me than 48,000

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<sup>133</sup> Lavrov, Anton "Russia in Syria: A Military Analysis", P. 52.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid P. 53

<sup>135</sup> United States. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on the Middle East North Africa, P. 6

<sup>136</sup> Popescu, Nicu and Secieru, Stanislav, "Russia in the Middle East - From Surge to Quagmire?", in Popescu, Nicu, and Stanislav Secieru. *Russia's Return to the Middle East Building Sandcastles?* Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2018. Chaillot Paper (Online), N° 146, July 2018. P. 110

<sup>137</sup> United States. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on the Middle East North Africa, P. 2

<sup>138</sup> Lavrov, Anton "Russia in Syria: A Military Analysis", P. 53.

officers and soldiers to acquire experience in Syria in the space of just two and a half years.”<sup>139</sup>

By expanding down into the south, Russia has been given a window through which it can closely observe the strategic tactics of the United States, as well as its NATO partners. Such authorization has enabled Russia to survey western military technology, to gauge its effectiveness, and to compare it to its weaponry. This, along with the aforementioned advantages, strongly support the argument that Russia’s military presence has been pivotal in its reentry in world politics.

### **The Role of Arms Sales:**

Military prowess has not been Putin’s only vehicle of renewed strength in the Middle East. Since the Soviet Union, the Kremlin has been known for its leading role in weapons suppliers which has historically been a point of great pride to the Russian people. It is well noted that “Russia has been one of the most active players in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region’s armaments market since the mid-twentieth century, using arms exports as an important policy instrument.”<sup>140</sup> During the 1970s, the Soviet Union became the main supplier of modern weapons systems, offering training courses in Russian military academies, as well as having its military personnel and technicians serve as advisers to Middle Eastern armed forces, often in Egypt and Syria.<sup>141</sup> By the time the Soviet Union collapsed, it “was the single largest supplier of conventional weapons to other countries.”<sup>142</sup> The importance of these arms transfers

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid. P. 53-54

<sup>140</sup> Borisov, Timofey “Russian Arms Exports in the Middle East”, in Popescu, Nicu and Secieru, Stanislav, *Russia’s Return to the Middle East Building Sandcastles?* Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2018. Chaillot Paper (Online), N° 146, July 2018. P. 37

<sup>141</sup> Klieman, Aaron S. *Soviet Russia and the Middle East*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1970. Print. Studies in International Affairs (Washington Center of Foreign Policy Research) ; No. 14. P. 39

<sup>142</sup> Anthony, Ian “Russia and the Arms Trade”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Oxford University Press, 1998. Preface. <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/books/SIPRI98An/SIPRI98An.pdf>

was that they helped to shape the balance of forces in regional areas, while also functioning as an element of military assistance programs which could help to achieve strategic objectives and trade deals. Once the Soviet Union fell, there was a sharp reduction in military expenditure, dropping between 40 and 50 percent between 1992 to 1995.<sup>143</sup> As the defense industry suffered from both a lack of investment and domestic procurement, many companies were forced to liquidate leaving few suppliers left.<sup>144</sup>

Today, Russia has looked to reinsert itself back into the limelight in its role of a prominent arms exporter and has made tremendous progress since its downfall in 1991. Moscow has now achieved the role of being the second largest arms exporter<sup>145</sup> in the world after the United States. The Kremlin has looked to the Middle East to rebuild itself in this area as well, with the Middle East absorbing the largest share of Russian arms exports in 2017<sup>146</sup> with over \$15 billion worth of military hardware being exported.<sup>147</sup> The demand for arms in the Middle East is expected to only increase, “driven by ongoing conflicts (such as those in Syria, Yemen, and Libya), the fragile security situation, and the threat of military confrontation between state and non-state actors. According to SIPRI, over the last decade, the region’s arms imports grew by 75% from 20% of the global total in 2009-13 to 35% in 2014-18.”<sup>148</sup> Although Russia lags behind the United States<sup>149</sup> as the main Middle East weapons importer, Russia’s outreach has only increased due to its contacts with Syria, Iran, and other states in the region. If one includes

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid. P. 3-4

<sup>144</sup> Borisov, Timofey “Russian Arms Exports in the Middle East” P. 38.

<sup>145</sup> Kanet, and Kanet, Roger E. *Russian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. P. 49

<sup>146</sup> Popescu, Nicu and Secieru, Stanislav, “Russia in the Middle East - From Surge to Quagmire?” P. 6.

<sup>147</sup> Borisov, Timofey “Russian Arms Exports in the Middle East” P. 38-39.

<sup>148</sup> Khlebnikov, Alexey “Russia Looks to the Middle East to Boost Arms Exports”, Middle East Institute, April 8, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-looks-middle-east-boost-arms-exports>

<sup>149</sup> The Middle Eastern countries import only 10% of their arms from Russia currently, whereas 54% come from the United States. Ibid.

the North African countries in addition to the Middle East (MENA), then the region ranks as the largest recipient of Russian armaments accounting for almost 50% of the total from contracts with 23 MENA countries.<sup>150</sup> In focusing just on the Middle Eastern countries, there are plenty of examples of renewed Russian arms deals. In 2012, Iraq signed a package worth \$4.2 billion, which at the time was Moscow's largest arms deal in the region since the Soviet Union's dissolution.<sup>151</sup> In 2014, Iraq became the second largest importer of Russian military equipment, importing a variety of weaponry including Su-25 attack aircraft, TOS-1A heavy flamethrower systems, Mi-28NE and Mi-25M attack helicopters worth 1.7 billion.<sup>152</sup> As aforementioned, the military intervention in Syria has improved Russia's ability to trade arms as it now has a platform within the Middle East to test drive and show off new weaponry. Another advantage of improving weapons distribution has been the fact that the Kremlin "has demonstrated that it is an important security actor in the MENA region which cannot be ignored."<sup>153</sup>

### **The Role of Diplomacy:**

Perhaps the most driving element behind both direct military intervention and trade deals has been Russia's efforts to improve diplomatic relations with the region. President Putin's diplomatic efforts to improve relationships within the region have been expansive, clearly to improve Russia's soft power advantages. For example, in Iran, Russia has spent the last decade attempting to dilute sanctions against the state and has also aided in the development of a nuclear

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<sup>150</sup> Borisov, Timofey "Russian Arms Exports in the Middle East" P. 38-39.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. P. 40

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. P. 40

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. P. 41

reactor in Bushehr.<sup>154</sup> By standing with Iran against the Western coalition, Russia has effectively won widespread support by citizens throughout the Middle East who see the United States as an imperialist power in the region. The Kremlin has effectively capitalized on the waning influence of the United States' soft power in the region, especially following the 2003 occupation of Iraq, to shift focus away from the West. Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi has only just recently signed a strategic partnership with Russia, which would entail further expansion of arms trade, joint military maneuvers, and the promise to construct a nuclear power plant in Dabaa.<sup>155</sup>

A more precise form of diplomacy that dominates the relationship between Russia and the Middle East is energy diplomacy. Energy diplomacy “typically refers to diplomatic and foreign policy activities conducted by a consumer country to secure access to energy resources from a producer country, with a view to ensuring *security of supply* ... Energy diplomacy may also refer to efforts deployed by a producer country to secure access to markets with a view of attaining *security of the demand*... The growing *rapprochement* between Russia and countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) encompasses the two forms of energy diplomacy. It is manifest in enhanced interaction and coordination among oil and gas-producing countries pursuing common interests...”<sup>156</sup> Taken together, the region of MENA and Russia “sit on 60% and 63% of the world’s proven oil and gas reserves, respectively, and produce half of the world’s oil and nearly 40% of its gas.”<sup>157</sup> Today, energy has become a primary factor of the Russian

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<sup>154</sup> “Russia's Nuclear Deal with Iran.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, [www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-nuclear-deal-iran](http://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-nuclear-deal-iran).

<sup>155</sup> Rfe/rl. “Putin, Egyptian Leader Sign 'Strategic' Partnership Treaty.” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, [RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty](http://RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty), 17 Oct. 2018, [www.rferl.org/a/putin-egyptian-leader-el-sissi-discuss-increasing-arms-sales-direct-air-links-moscow-visit-sochi/29547819.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/putin-egyptian-leader-el-sissi-discuss-increasing-arms-sales-direct-air-links-moscow-visit-sochi/29547819.html).

<sup>156</sup> Kahle, Carole “Russia’s Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East” in Popescu, Nicu and Secrieru, Stanislav, *Russia’s Return to the Middle East Building Sandcastles?* Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2018. Chaillot Paper (Online), N° 146, July 2018. P. 29

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.* P. 30

economy, as well as a primary tool for enacting foreign policy. In 2005 while attending the G-8 summit, President Putin boasted that “Russia is the world leader in the energy market, with the biggest potential in oil, gas, and nuclear power taken together.”<sup>158</sup> It is indeed true that Russia has become the world’s top producer and exporter of oil and natural gas, while also hosting the largest reserves of gas and uranium.<sup>159</sup> The importance of these resources for Russia’s international image has become clear by the fact that the official energy strategy of 2003 explicitly mentioned these resources as a political instrument, as did the 2009 security doctrine. This has resulted in the total state ownership of oil companies including Transneft, which has a monopoly on oil pipelines, as well as Gazprom which dominates the gas market.<sup>160</sup> When the U.S. sanctions came to fruition in 2014, Russia’s oil prices collapsed, resulting in a decline from \$110 per barrel to less than \$60 in just 6 months.<sup>161</sup> It was at this time that Russia heavily began to work with Arab countries, specifically those in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to improve its dire situation. In 2016, OPEC announced that it would coordinate a production cut, while also including Russia which, within a year, helped to restabilize the Russian economy, going from “recession to recovery” as well as the oil industry which bounced back to valuing oil barrels at \$70 in just a few months.<sup>162</sup> By 2018, Saudi Arabia had taken the further step to invite Russia to become an observing member of OPEC, deepening the relationship from its previous temporary status.

Russia has coupled this style of energy diplomacy with investments funds that look to attract foreign funds into the country. For example, the Russian Direct Investment Fund, founded

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<sup>158</sup> Kanet, and Kanet, Roger E. *Russian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*. P. 49-50.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid. P. 49-50

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. P. 50

<sup>161</sup> Kahle, Carole “Russia’s Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East” P. 29.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. P. 32.

in 2011, has already attracted \$30 billion of foreign capital into the local economy. This capital has come from partners, including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), Qatar Holding, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), and the DP World (United Arab Emirates-UAE).<sup>163</sup> Energy has overlapped with investments, for example in the case of Rosneft who is also pursuing investments directly in "oil and gas projects from Algeria to Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, and Oman, further building closer ties with various governments and local entities."<sup>164</sup> Russia's diplomatic return to the region has ensured that "all geopolitical actors in the region engage with Russia and pay due respect to its interests."<sup>165</sup> Such skillful statecraft has helped coin the phrase "playing a weak hand well" when referring to how Russia has managed to exert so much power in recent years despite very much still being in a recovering stage. Although Russia is not yet the world player that it was in the Soviet Union, by capitalizing on its strengths Russia has put itself into a position of resurgent influence in the region of the Middle East.

### **Conclusion:**

Although the resurgence of Russian power has worried Western powers, it should not be overstated. In spite of the initiatives that the Kremlin has pursued in regaining international prestige, Russia's economy remains rather stagnant and it is unlikely that they will regain any kind of extraordinary military superiority in the near future. The Russian economy retains long standing constraints on growth, especially as a result of the sanctions implemented against them following the 2014 invasion of Ukraine. The economy is weak in terms of diversification of exports, is highly dependent on imports of machinery and technologies, and is plagued by high

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid. P. 33

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. P. 33

<sup>165</sup> Popescu, Nicu and Secieru, Stanislav, *Russia's Return to the Middle East Building Sandcastles?* P. 110.



energy prices.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, the fact that many wealthy Russians keep their capital overseas means that domestic investment remains low.<sup>167</sup> The chance of an offensive military operation committed by Russia is highly unlikely, with NATO investing more and more into the defense systems of Russia's bordering Eastern European states. The Kremlin seems to also be aware of this, as they have implemented intensive measures towards developing their cyber capabilities as a means for asymmetrical warfare. Russia's other issues, including deep seated corruption, population decline, and poor infrastructure, only further complicate its attempts to regain a great power status.

Moving forward, the Russian Federation is likely to continue to invest resources into asymmetrical means of challenging Western dominance. In the absence of an ability to regain power through conventional means, the Kremlin will capitalize upon new spaces of power struggle such as the cyber world or through the weaponization of disinformation. In terms of the Middle East, Russia is likely to continue to eye it as an important geopolitical area for challenging Western supremacy, although will most likely not engage in any direct manner. President Putin will remain pragmatic in his involvement, only extending Russian resources into the region for clear economic or military return. Altogether, the efforts made by the Kremlin thus far to regain prestige have been slow and incremental at best, and do not indicate a return to great power status, in terms of economic or military might, at any point in the near future.

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<sup>166</sup> Timofeev, Ivan, "Theses on Russia's Foreign Policy and Global Positioning (2017–2024)," *Russian International Affairs Council*, June 30, 2017.

<sup>167</sup> Radin, Andrew, Lynn E. Davis, Edward Geist, Eugeniu Han, Dara Massicot, Matthew Povlock, Clint Reach, Scott Boston, Samuel Charap, William Mackenzie, Katya Migacheva, Trevor Johnston, and Austin Long, *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.-Russia Competition*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019. P. 25. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3099.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3099.html).



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